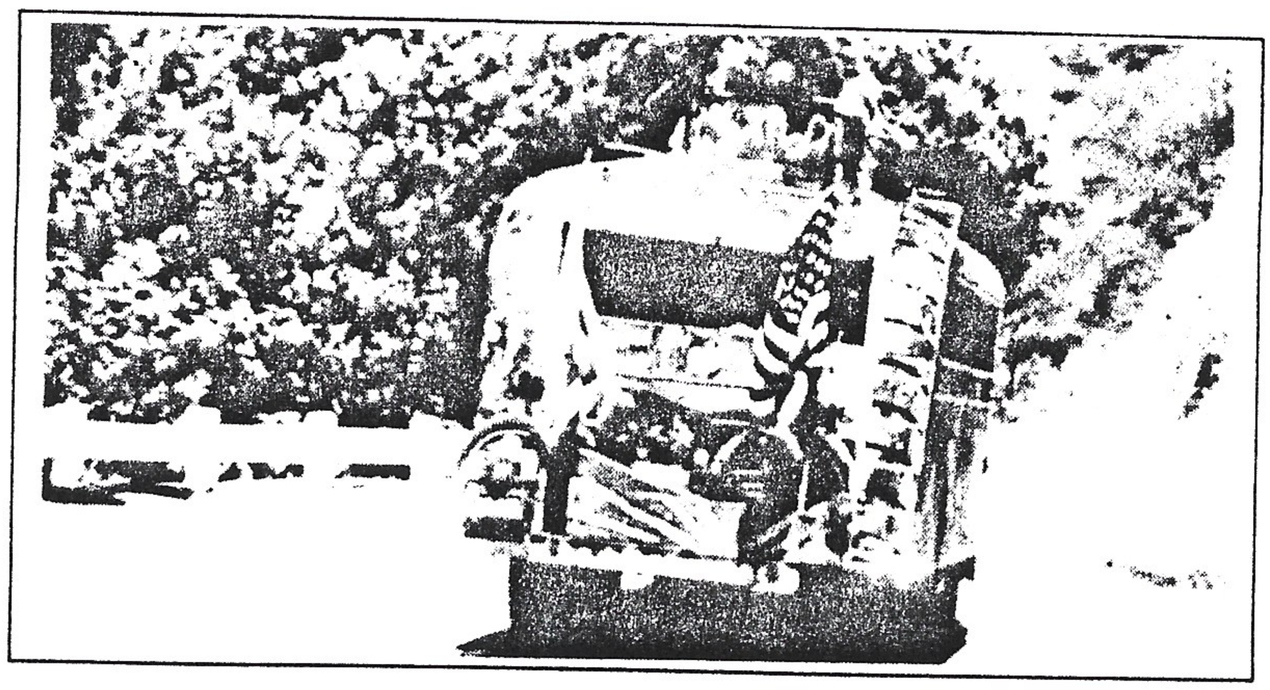
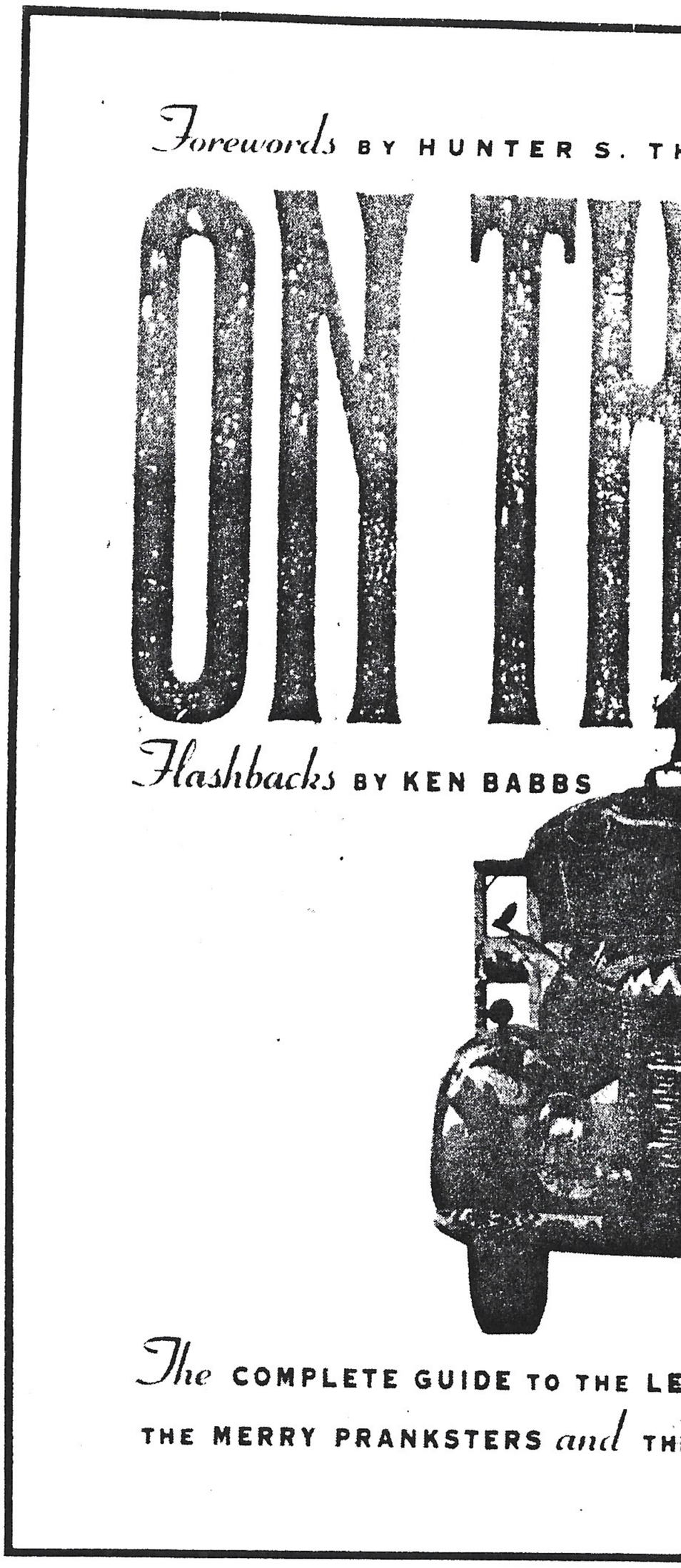




It was the bus ride that inspired the ultimate socio-political question of the Sixties: "Are you on the bus, or off it?"

In 1964 author Ken Kesey (*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest, Sometimes A Great Notion*) and a band of what would come to be known as Merry Pranksters set out from La Honda, California in a psychedelically painted school bus. Their destination both the World's Fair then in progress at Flushing Meadow Park, New York, and some mythical place called 'Further.' At the wheel that legendary hipster, immortalized as Dean Moriarity in Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, Neal Cassady.

In its own way the trip was an announcement that the Sixties had arrived, a prelude to Haight-Ashbury, and will forever be regarded with the same nostalgia as the early music of the Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead. The whole scene was later documented by Tom Wolfe in his bestselling *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* .

Late last year, to coincide, roughly, with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the cross-country adventure and 'birth of the counterculture,' two more books began to appear in local bookstores, *The Further Inquiry*, by Kesey himself, and *On The Bus*, by Paul Perry, with 'flashbacks' provided by Prankster Ken Babbs. Both vibrantly illustrated, Perry's is the superior of the two books, mixing straight narrative — something Kesey's book is sorely in need of, with the undiluted recollections of participants in Kesey's life. The tone of the book is set by the intermingling of a history of the drug that so influenced the journey, LSD, and Kesey's years as a student enrolled in the graduate writing program at Stanford University. It was while in that program that he began writing *Cuckoo's Nest*, and would read its early chapters to such classmates as Robert Stone (*Children Of Light*) and Larry McMurtry (*Lonesome Dove*, et al).

"What was going on in my mind when producing the book was basically one of those PBS documentaries where you combine footage from the period with current interviews," said Perry during a recent interview from his home in Scotsdale, Arizona. "This is as close as we could come to doing that in the book medium."

Having read Wolfe's book while in college in the early 70's, Perry first met Ken Kesey in 1980, while serving as editor of Running Magazine, a publication based in Eugene, Oregon — then considered the running capitol of the world, and just incidently, Kesey's hometown.

During his job interview the publishers asked if he could get Kesey, Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer to write for the magazine, money was no object, and, wanting the position, Perry said sure. Once hired though, he had to produce.

"So one of the first people I looked up was Kesey. I'd been aware of him from his literary out put, besides *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and when I went out to his farm, it was almost like nothing had changed from 1964.

"I mean, the bus was still out there, sitting out in a field and, you know, Kesey lives in a [converted] barn, and he's sitting there, smoking a joint, and kind of holding court with anyone who comes in — and there's always a lot of people coming and going."

Kesey took Perry to another, separate building on the property called 'The Hothouse,' a log cabin in which Kesey works. Half the cabin houses the Prankster's archives.

"The first time I went out there, he took me into the archives and I got the opportunity to listen to a lot of audio tape of the trip itself and Neal Cassady, and to see a lot of photos and some of the film. And I said, 'Ken, you really should get this into a book because it can get burned up out here, it can get mildewed, or lost.' He said, 'Well, that's a good idea. [But] I've tried to do that before and no one wants it.'

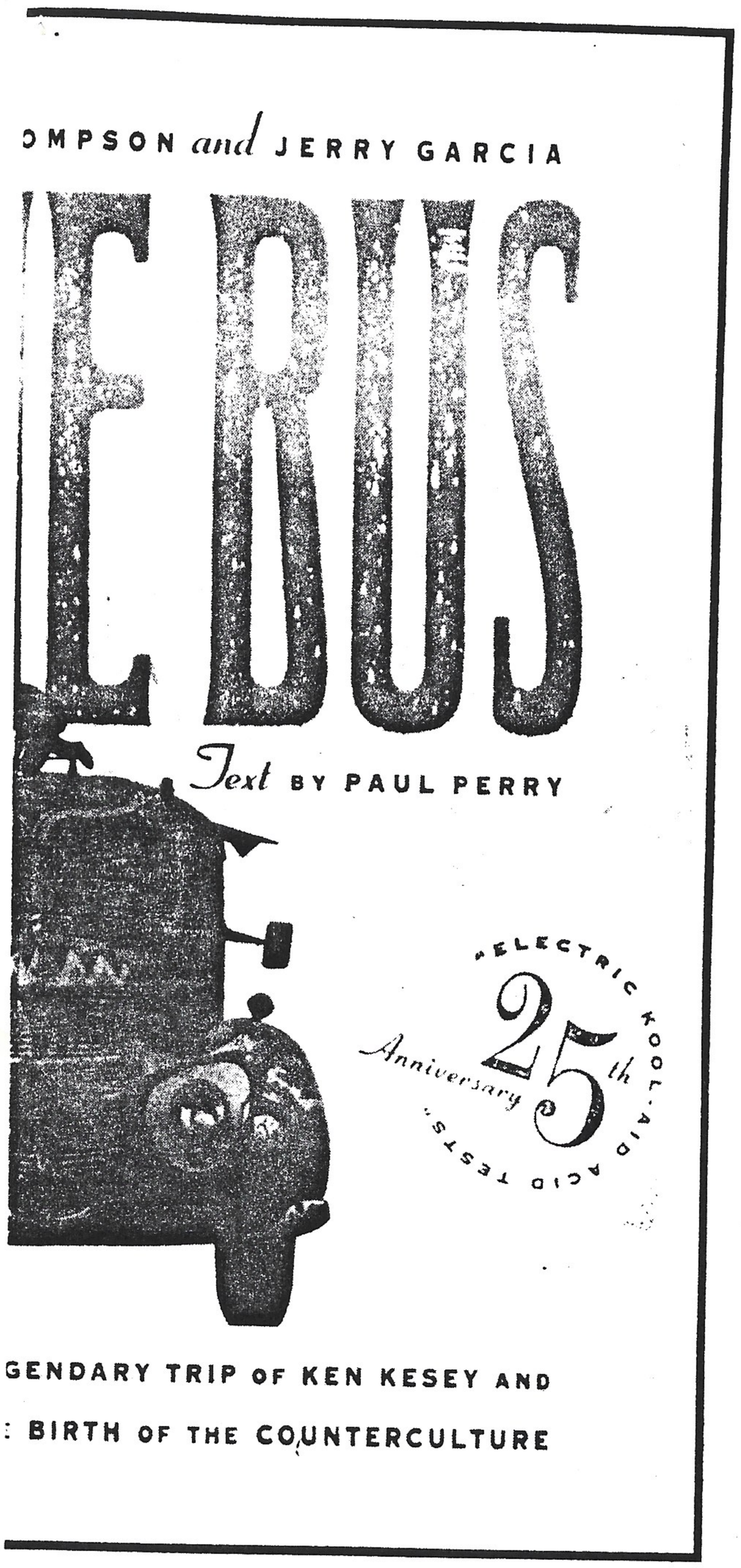
"Over the course of the next five years I brought the subject up several times and he finally said, 'If you think you can have better luck than I did, why don't you go ahead and try to do it.' And that's what I did."

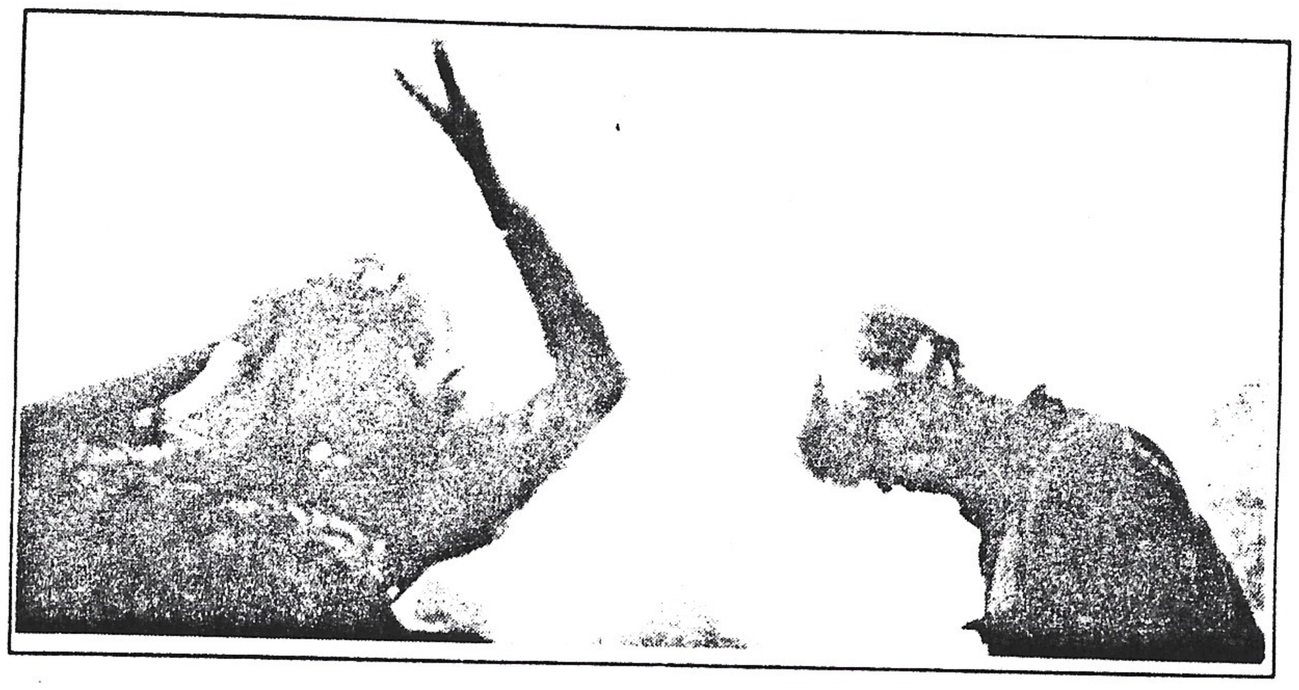
To help weave through all the people and events, he recruited Prankster Ken Babbs, dubbed 'The Intrepid Traveller' the night before the trip began. It was an uneasy partnership, according to Perry, because of creative disagreements, but Babb's contributions do lend the book a Prankster's eye view, in the form of reconstructed events.

"[The Merry Pranksters] are kind of like a fraternity in a way, and if you weren't there for the founding, and when they had some of their real bonding experiences, you're never really going to get into the fraternity.

"I felt an affinity for them in the sense that they're free spirits on the whole, and they're fun to be around — they don't make you feel like an outsider, but you're just not quite one of the guys. A lot of people come around Kesey's place

When Anything No





hoping to become one of the Pranksters, and they never quite accomplish it. It's very frustrating for them."

Once arrayed about Kesey-like satellites, the Pranksters were long ago absorbed into the pop culture landscape, and have been reflected in everything from the politically hip Doonesbury comic strip — the character Zonker's name is borrowed from a Prankster; the character Duke based on Hunter S. Thompson, not a Prankster, but a fellow traveller and the person who introduced them to the Hell's Angels — to the sure-not-to-scare-grandma Partridge Family school bus, which bore the very unPranksterish message, "Nervous Mom At Wheel," amongst its candy colors.

"Some of what I expected to find," said Perry, "I didn't find. Everyone always told us that LSD is bad for you, and I'm not so sure it isn't, but I do know that in interviewing these people, I didn't find anyone who seemed to be significantly brain damaged; I didn't find battle casualties from the Sixties. I was surprised by that. The Pranksters themselves are twenty five years older, but they still act like kids."

Did he uncover anything new, or forgotten, either about the Pranksters or the bus trip itself?

"I don't think so," Perry admitted. "I mean, look at the original intent of the bus ride through the eyes of the people who took it: some just wanted to get to New York [laughs], that was their point of getting on the bus; others, Kesey among them, though he sometimes denies it, wanted to create a new medium, not knowing what that medium would be.

"They were going to 'live' a novel, and in the course of living that novel, they were going to film it. That's a very innovative thing to do. And a very gutsy thing for someone like Kesey to do. He had just ground out two enormously successful novels, and all of a sudden he takes his life in a totally different direction in search of something that — he doesn't even know what it is he's looking for.

"Ultimately they probably failed, because nothing came out of the 48 miles of film they shot, or the hundreds of hours of audio tape that they have. And nothing, probably, ever will. The film is all so bad. It's out of focus, there's no establishing shots, and on and on. But at least they tried. You've got to give them that one.

"The lessons of the bus trip? Exercise your freedom, but don't exercise it too hard [laughs], that was certainly one of them. Don't be afraid to get out and live life. There are many, but I don't know if I can answer beyond that."

On The Bus ends not in triumph, but with the death of Neal Cassady along a lonely stretch of railroad track in Mexico in February, 1968. After Kesey, he was probably the bus trip's next most valuable player. And yet despite his own just stated opinions and Cassady's demise, Perry resists interpreting the Pranksters's as a tremendously sad story.

"Well, [it's] probably sad for Neal," he conceeded, thoughtfully. "I don't think it's ultimately sad for the other people involved. They became who they are largely because of that event. Some of them are better off for it, some of them aren't. There have been some very successful Pranksters. Then there are others, who were kind of goof-offs, who haven't done much at all. And then there's Kesey. God knows what he's doing. Why hasn't he written another great novel?

"Larry McMurtry was the only person who was around back then and wouldn't talk about it, which, I suspect, is because he thought it was a lot of foolishness. And I suspect also that he felt it hurt Kesey as a writer.

"McMurtry's very work-driven, as you might guess from the number of books he's got on the shelves, and Kesey used to be that way, but is much, much less since then. I think McMurtry feels that the reason Kesey changed so much is because of the LSD."

Since the fabled events of the mid-Sixties, Ken Kesey has written some magazine pieces, and exactly five books: *The Further Inquiry*, *The Demon Box*, *Tricker The Squirrel Meets Big Double The Bear*, *Kesey's Garage Sale* and, with one of the classes he taught at the University of Oregon, *Caverns*. The latter a work he supervised far more often than he authored. *The Demon Box* is the only novel among them. Perry admitted he was loathed to ask Kesey what happened.

"That's a daunting thing to do with Kesey. He's a big, blustery Irishman, and to say, 'Gee Ken, did you fail on the bus trip?' He's likely to run you over with a tractor. I don't really think he feels like a failure as a result of the trip. I really don't. It was just a neat attempt to live life as a novel, and he did that. That would be his argument. 'Well I did that, so I didn't fail.'"

By Danny McCue

t Naked Was Wrong